RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

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DEVELOPING A METHODOLOGY FOR TRACKING HOMELESS PEOPLE OVER THE LONG TERM

INTRODUCTION

Longitudinal studies are recognized as ideal for understanding the course of homelessness and identifying factors that assist people to exit homelessness. To date, virtually no generalizable, longitudinal research on homelessness has been conducted in Canada.

The Panel Study on Homelessness, being conducted in Ottawa, is a first attempt at examining the pathways into and out of homelessness by following a cohort of homeless persons over time. The research objective for the first wave of the study was to interview a representative sample of current residents of Ottawa emergency shelters in order to gather descriptive data on demographic characteristics, housing history, health status and health and social service utilization. A sample of 416 homeless participants was interviewed between October 2002 and May 2003. There were five subgroups of participants: adult men, adult women, families (defined as at least one adult with at least one child under the age of 16), male youth and female youth.

The ultimate goal of the study is to identify and explain factors that distinguish individuals who escape homelessness from those who remain homeless or who experience multiple episodes of homelessness. A major challenge to successfully conducting such studies is locating the study participants over time because of their unstable housing situations and often-transient lifestyles

This research project used the panel study to develop and empirically validate a methodology for locating as many participants as possible over time.

METHODOLOGY

Based on a review of the relevant literature, a tracking protocol was developed for the panel study.

The tracking process began at the initial interview. Participants were asked to provide consent to contact individuals and agencies, or both, they were likely to be in contact with in one year's time. As much information as possible was gathered to facilitate finding these contacts, which included friends, family members, service providers, hospitals and shelters.

Although not initially part of the request for contact information, participants offered their cellphone numbers and e-mail addresses as primary contact sources. It became obvious that this was valuable information not originally anticipated and participants were subsequently asked whether they had a cellphone and e-mail address.

Several companies offer free e-mail. In Ottawa, there is free Internet access at the Ottawa Public Library and some community centres and community medical centres.

Participants were also asked to provide consent for the researchers to contact the City of Ottawa Employment and Financial Assistance (EFA) branch, to search for addresses and phone numbers of participants. In Ottawa, the EFA distributes all social benefits, including social assistance, disability and employment insurance.

Tracking strategies were tailored to individual subgroups. Each sub-sample was assigned to one researcher, who was responsible for determining the best method of tracking these individuals. In general, the following strategy was used:

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1. Personal contact by e-mail or cellphone.
2. Access City of Ottawa EFA database for those who gave consent (send letters to those with addresses but no phone numbers, phone those for whom numbers are available).
3. For male adults—contact shelters, then families and friends. For other subgroups–contact families and friends, then shelters.
4. Check EFA database a second time.
5. Contact service professionals.

FINDINGS

All subgroups

The researchers tried to locate a total of 416 people. They were successful in locating 262 individuals or families—63 per cent of the 416 study participants.

To find the 262 participants, the researchers made 1,961 contacts—an average of 4.7 attempts per participant. Much of the contact information provided at the time of the interview was outdated by the time tracking was attempted so multiple contacts had to be pursued for most participants.

The lowest proportion of participants found was among male adults (52 per cent) and the highest among male youth (73 per cent).

The researchers did not speak directly to each located participant as long as they were satisfied that the participant was "reachable." For example, for participants living in a place without a telephone but whose location was confirmed by a close relative, the researchers were reluctant to ask the family members to inconvenience themselves during the tracking phase because they would be asking for their assistance at the re-interview. Or, for the many youth participants who are regular clients of drop-in centres, the staff there assured researchers that they would be able to contact those participants when the time comes to re-interview them.

Table 1—Tracking results

Subgroup	Found	Not found	Total
Male youth	58 (73%)	21 (27%)	79
Female youth	54 (67%)	27 (33%)	81
Families	53 (63%)	31 (37%)	84
Female adults	51 (61%)	33 (39%)	84
Male adults	46 (52%)	42 (48%)	88
Total	**262 (63%)**	**154 (37%)**	**416**

Male adults

On average, 5.7 individual attempts were made to locate each male adult study participant. Forty-six participants (52 per cent) were located.

The two most productive sources of information for locating the study participants were Ottawa's EFA and shelter staff. Seventy-nine per cent of the participants found were located through these two sources.

Male adults were the subgroup most likely to be living in shelters or shelter affiliates (46 per cent). Over the course of the tracking period, some of the participants were known to have been very transient and were found after having left the city and returned several times. Therefore, it is expected that some of the participants whose locations are currently unknown will be found during the next tracking period.

Female adults

Fifty-one female adult participants (61 per cent) were located. An average of four individual attempts were made to contact each participant.

The EFA database was by far the most valuable source of location information for female adults.

Of the female adults whose housing situation is known, 63 per cent were housed but 12 per cent remain in shelters or in shelter-affiliated housing. Five of the located adult female participants have left the Ottawa area and one of them has died since the interview.

Families

Within the family sample, 14 of the participants were male and 70 female. Fifty-three (63 per cent) family participants were located. The average number of contacts made to locate each participant was four.

The most useful source of information for locating family participants was the EFA database, although shelter staff were often able to provide the same information.

Sixty-four per cent of the located family participants were housed. This is a higher percentage than the other subgroups in the study, although the percentage for adult females was similar.

Male youth

Fifty-eight male youth (73 per cent) were located during the tracking period. An average of five individual attempts to locate each participant was made.

The most valuable contacts for male youth were family members and shelter staff.

Many of the male youth whose housing situation is known are still in unstable housing or homeless.

Female youth

Fifty-four of the female youth study participants were located. This represents 67 per cent of the sample. An average of 4.8 attempts were made to contact each of the 81 participants.

Families were the primary source of contact information for female youth but, unlike the other subgroups, friends also provided valuable assistance in locating participants in this subgroup.

Of those female youth whose housing situation is known, very few are still in shelters and just over 20 per cent are living with a family member.

LESSONS LEARNED

Labour-intensive nature of tracking procedure

Tracking study participants was much more labour intensive than originally anticipated. There were 1,961 contacts made to locate 262 participants. Much of the contact information provided at the time of the interview was outdated by the time tracking was attempted so multiple contacts had to be pursued for most participants.

It is very difficult to determine the average amount of time it took to locate participants because there were very few typical cases. Some participants were found by a single call to the cellphone number given at the time of interview; other participants might have provided six contacts, only one of which had a functional phone number. Several messages would be left over the course of a week or two, both during the day and in the evenings. If the call was returned at a time when no one was answering one of the Panel Study telephones, the process began again.

Another time-consuming search strategy was travelling to addresses provided by the EFA when no phone number or any other contact was available. Because the researchers travelled in pairs, the amount of time taken for each of these contact attempts was doubled. The success of this tracking strategy was variable, with greater success for families than the other subgroups.

Consent forms

The consent forms did not provide broad enough consent to follow all potential leads. It was not clear how tenaciously researchers could pursue all available leads without overstepping the bounds of the consent. Errors made on the consent forms in spelling or recording phone numbers by original interviewers made contacting family or friends difficult in a small number of cases.

It would have been useful if more contact information had been acquired from the study participants at the time of the initial interview. Some participants gave only one person as a contact because they were confident that this person would be able to report their whereabouts in a year's time. However, if this contact person had moved, this source could be lost. Therefore, it is important to probe for other contacts even if the participant is confident that no others are required.

Tracking strategies appropriate to subgroup

It was necessary to use a wide variety of tracking methods to locate the maximum number of study participants. The most successful tracking strategies for this project were those that recognized the significant differences between the subgroups. For example, a strategy that relied on contacting family members of adult men would have yielded very poor results (two per cent found this way) whereas this same strategy used to locate female youth was very successful (33 per cent located this way). Information from the shelters provided few leads for locating female youth (four per cent) whereas 35 per cent of adult men were found this way.

E-mail and cellphones

Although many of the youth participants gave cellphone numbers at the time of interview, none of the numbers was in service when tracking began. Only two participants were located from cellphone numbers given at the time of interview and both were male adults.

E-mail was more successful, but only for the youth participants. No adult or family participants were located through e-mail addresses given at the interviews, but for youth participants, particularly male youth, this proved to be a valuable source of information, as eight male and two female youth were located this way.

Importance of immediate follow-up once located

When the follow-up phase of the study is undertaken it will be essential to interview participants as soon as they are located. Many of the participants who were not found at the beginning of the tracking period returned to Ottawa or showed up on the EFA database or were in contact with their families at a later stage of tracking. For example, during the course of this project, one participant moved from Toronto to Huntsville to Calgary to Vancouver to Calgary to Toronto. For part of the time the researchers were not able to find him but, after repeated calls to a family member over several months, he was located. If participants such as this are not interviewed immediately upon being found, they could be lost to the study.

Importance of the EFA database

One of the most valuable sources of information for this project was the City of Ottawa's Employment and Financial Assistance (EFA) Database. Although quite time consuming, it would have been valuable to have accessed these records three times over the course of the tracking period rather

than twice because of the valuable information the records contained and because the information quickly became out-of-date because of the frequency with which many of the participants moved.

It would have also been very helpful to have received permission to contact similar agencies in other provinces, especially Quebec. Many participants, particularly francophones, may have relocated to the Gatineau area. In addition, as several families were in subsidized housing, it might be useful to have access to a database of social housing residents, if this is possible.

Importance of information provided by shelter and drop-in staff

The co-operation of shelter and drop-in staff was invaluable in providing leads or actually locating study participants for research staff.

Willingness of study participants to take part in follow-up

Only four study participants who were located asked not to be contacted for the follow-up phase of the study. Many were very enthusiastic about participating but did not know how to get in touch with study personnel. At the interview, more effort should have been expended to solicit the participants' co-operation in keeping the researchers advised of their changing housing situations and new contact information. This could have included monetary or other incentives, consistent with tracking strategies reported in other studies.

The importance of establishing trust and rapport at the initial interview was clearly evident in the case of several of the study participants, who were very pleased to be contacted by the interviewer, or another researcher involved with the study, because they had enjoyed the time that they had spent doing the interview and were anxious to participate again.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Consent forms

1. Interviewers should be encouraged to acquire as many contacts as possible—family, friends, service providers, shelters—and care should be taken to ensure that all contact information is recorded accurately—correct spelling, correct phone numbers, and so on. Participants should also be asked if they have e-mail addresses and cellphone numbers, or both, because, although their use was limited among some of the subgroups, it is likely that more participants will be making use of this technology in the future, particularly youth participants.

2. Consent forms should indicate the participant's willingness to be re-contacted and indicate consent for the study team to pursue contacts other than those specifically indicated on the consent. Getting broader consent to contact shelter staff and other service providers would also be helpful.

3. Consent forms should allow the participant to indicate any persons or organizations that he or she would not permit the researcher to contact.

4. Consent to access records of those receiving social assistance in other provinces would be another valuable tracking tool.

Soliciting participants' assistance

5. A business card should be left with each participant to facilitate future contact.

6. At the interview, participants could be asked to contact the study office if they become housed or their contact information changes. They could also be asked to contact the study office within a specific period, which would be noted on the card left with the participant.

7. Incentives could be offered to participants to inform the Panel Study office of these changes.

Centralized administration of tracking

8. A full-time research co-ordinator is required to oversee the tracking procedure. This is necessary to maintain good relationships with shelter, drop-in and municipal staff, essential partners in successful tracking. This single contact would avoid multiple, overlapping requests by various tracking staff and contribute to the efficiency of the tracking process. A full-time co-ordinator would ensure that every lead is followed immediately, which is essential given the transient nature of the study population. It would also allow for constant monitoring of the effectiveness of the tracking strategy and the immediate implementation of any required changes.

9. Tracking should be centred in one office, where someone is available to make and receive calls (with a toll-free long distance number) from 9 a.m. until 9 p.m. so that calls are not missed from participants who do not have a home phone and who are using public or friends' phones.

10. Staff should be provided with business cards to be left with study participants at the time of interview, with potential contacts and service providers, and at the home addresses of participants at the time of contact.

Different strategies for different populations

11. Tracking strategies should be adjusted according to the nature of the population being tracked. In particular, the use of information provided by the EFA database was particularly effective for single adults and families. In contrast, families proved to be the most helpful source of information for youth.

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